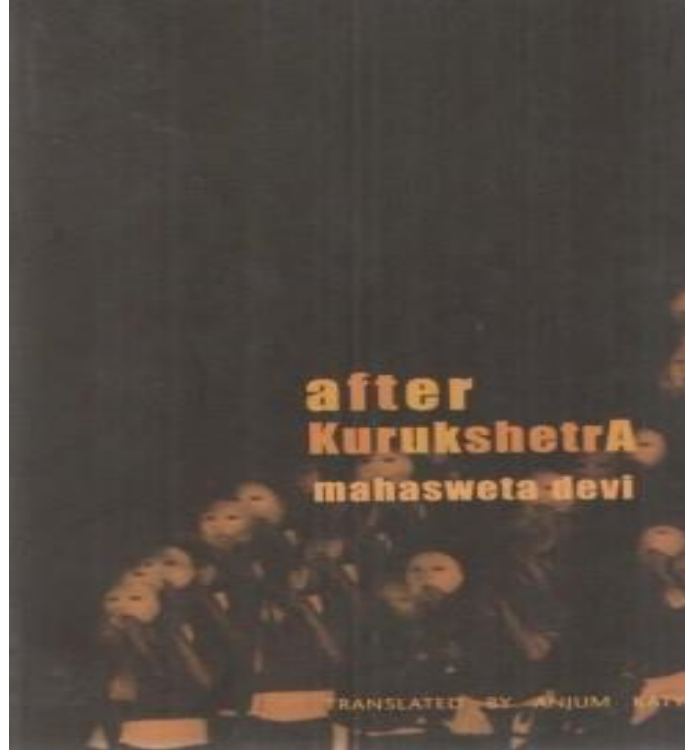


*The Royal Clan Vs the Marginalised:
An Analysis of the Lifestyles of Women in Mahasweta Devi's
Panchakanya (Five Women)*

K. R. Athista, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed. PGDTE & Dr. G. Baskaran, M.A, M.Phil., Ph.D.



Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi is a contemporary Bengali woman writer and committed social activist working for the welfare of the tribal communities in India. Born in 1926 in a family of writers and culture workers, Devi mixes the high literary style of old Bengali literature with tribal language. She has come to be regarded as one of India's most radical writers. In newspapers and journals, she has written articles in support of the tribal people and their rights. "I am wary of the West," (Shands, 19) says Devi in an interview with Gayatri Spivak. She underlines that "the tribal population of India is about one-sixth of the total population of the country (India)" and yet they have not been a part of decolonization, even though "they have paid the price" (Spivak, ix, xi). Debasish Chattopadhyay, a critic, suggests that Devi's "voice does not simply ventriloquize

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the plight of those at the edges of civilization, but goes deeper to analyse and reflect upon how the power structures that engender marginalisation are replicated in the texture of the society of the marginalized.” (Chattopadhyay, 111).

After Kurukshetra

Devi’s *After Kurukshetra* translated by Anjum Katyal is a collection of the three stories, namely, “*Panchakanya [Five Women]*”, “*Kunti o Nishadin [Kundi and the Nishadin]*” and “*Souvali [Souvali]*”. As a visionary, Devi foresees the aftermath of the *dharmayudha* (the holy war) of Kurushetra in all her three stories. The *dharmayudha* takes place in Kurukshetra between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The Indian epic *The Mahabharatha* documents the war and its after effects. *After Kurukshetra* narrates the story of the great war in *The Mahabharata*. Taking the source from the ancient epic, Devi weaves the three stories by looking at the events through the eyes of the marginalized and the disposed women. There are two classes of women in *Panchakanya* : the *rajavrittis* and the *lokavittis*. The *rajavrittis* are the royal women living in the palace and the *lokavrittis* belong to the world of the common men. The *Rajavrittis* enjoy the privileges which are denied to the *lokavrittis*. The latter belong to the class of the farmers and the hunters. The aim of this paper is to analyse the contrasted lifestyles of the women belonging to the royal clan and the marginalised in Devi’s *Panchakanya*.

John Keay, a historian, states in *India a History*, “An Aryanised society may be defined as one in which primacy is accorded to a particular language (Sanskrit) to an authoritative priesthood (Brahmans) and to a hierarchichal social structure (caste)” (Keay, 28). Indian society has a fourfold division: the *Brahmans* (the priests), the *Kshatriyas* (the warriors), the *Vysyas* (the merchants) and the *Sudras* (the marginalised). The *Brahmans* occupy the highest position in the social hierarchy and the *Sudhras* hold the lowest position. Uttara (widow of Abimanyu), Queen Subhadra and Draupadi (mothers – in –law of Uttara), Kunti and Gandhari represent the *rajavritta* women in *Panchakanya*. Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta, Vipasha (the five widowed women of the foot soldiers) and Madraja (the head *dasi* of the royal women’s quarters) represent the *lokavritta* women in the story.

Marginalised

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The *padatiks* are foot soldiers. They are protectors of chariot – mounted heroes of war. The *padatiks* are slaughtered innumerable in the *dharmayuddah*. Being armless, their deaths are disproportionately huge. There is stench of their decaying flesh. Owing to mass human destruction, the warriors are given common cremation by piling up several of their dead bodies simultaneously on the funeral pyre. This creates an eerie atmosphere. The *chandals* (a lower caste attending on the funeral pyre) have no role in the war. They gather firewood after the war. Their primary job is to quench with water the heat of the fire of the nameless dead soldiers in the war. As the war continues for years, they say, “Let the river flood, drown the fires.”(Devi, 2). Womenfolk of the families of the *padatiks* gather together and mourn in the dark. The *Kurukshetra* ground protests in spews, ‘angry heat’ so that the five black - clad women find themselves unable to return to their homes in the *Kurjangal* region. Madraja engages the five widows to assist the young and pregnant Uttara. Devi employs this situation for a juxtaposition of the lifestyles of the women belonging to the royal clan and the marginalised.

Wedding Celebrations in the Royal Household and the Marginalised

Devi provides a contrasted picture of the wedding celebrations in the royal household and the marginalised. The weddings of the royal clan usually fill the air with happiness. Fire ceremonies take place in royal weddings. To witness royal weddings, the entire country gathers at a single place. The nomadic traders, the wandering magicians, the snake charmers, the dancers and the puppeteers visit the country during the marriage eve. The entire kingdom resounds with narration of wondrous tales, dance and songs. On the other hand, the marriages of the farming families are simple. Married women are assigned the responsibility to decorate the young brides. Therefore, they “walk to river to collect water . . . to bathe a new bride.”(Devi, 17). Encircled with bustling activities, they laugh, talk loud and walk restlessly in the entire town.

Widows of the Royal Clan and the Marginalised

Devi next contrasts the appearance of the widows of the royal clan and the marginalised. Women in both the sections of the society wear different colour dresses during their widowhood. The widows of the *padatiks* wear black cloth covering their breasts with a knot behind. A plain black cloth is worn around their waists, covering their heads. They conduct themselves very

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naturally. They chat and talk. They pose riddles and solve them. The women of the *rajavritta* are “white-clad” (Devi, 13). They wear no ornaments. Their hair hangs heavily on their shoulders. They roam around the palace in grief like “shadowy ghosts” (Devi, 17). They are forbidden from smiling and they are instructed to walk in a timid and hesitant manner. Subhadra says that the *rajavritta* widows must follow the example set by Arya Kunti in this world. The *acharyas* (teachers at the palace) instruct them the rigorous rules of widowhood.

Widow Remarriage

Devi’s contrasts the remarriage prospects for the widows. Royal widows suffer endlessly without provisions for remarriages. From the epical times, the royal households have not permitted widow remarriages. So, they live alone sorrowfully. They lead shadowy existence. Contrarily, widow remarriages are common among the marginalised. So, widows remarry after the death of their husbands and live happily in their homes. The widows of the *janavritta* (common humanity) lead normal lives doing their daily chores. They enjoy the provisions of remarriages after the death of their husbands. The five women say “we marry our brother-in-law” (Devi, 22). After performing the funeral rites of the husband, the elders of the family arrange remarriage for a widow. *Janavritta* women say “We need husbands, we need children. The village needs to hear the sound of chatter and laughter. We will ... create life. That’s what nature teaches us.”(Devi, 22). There seems to be self-imposed royal objection to widow remarriages in their own clan.

Attitude to Nature

The *Janavritta* community worships nature and the earth. The people live in harmony with nature. They till their fields and rear their cattle. They eat venison meat. They optimistically say “After a terrible calamity, the sun always rises.’ The women of the royal family, on the other hand, are far removed from nature. Uttara has no personal intimacy with nature. She sees distant mountain ranges from the roof of her father’s house. She harbours only recollected memories of lakes mentioned by her nurse in her childhood. After her wedding, she is totally removed from nature. The *Janavritta* women hunt animals. They enjoy deer hunting and use war weapons like the spear. The royal women know that spears are war weapons used

by men. They are ignorant that peasants are turned into foot soldiers and they use spears. They only know how to “cook venison every day.” (Devi, 13).

Attitude to Pregnancy and Gender of the Children

There is a contrast between the royal and the marginalised women in their attitude to pregnancy. The royal women take rest during their pregnancy. The *Janavritta* women, on the other hand, consider pregnancy a law of nature. The pregnant women in their clan are not allowed to lie down and to take rest. The women are busy doing ‘light chores’ (Devi, 9). They walk in the garden at daybreak and do simple household chores like folding clothes and watering the *tulsi* (herbal and devotional) plants. “Keep active, the birth’ll be easier” (Devi, 9) is their belief.

There is a contrast in the attitude of the women to the sex of the children to be born. A *Janavritta* accepts any child whereas the royal family longs only for a female child. When Subhadra predicts a boy in Uttara’s womb, the latter says, “It would be nice if it were a girl. If it’s a boy, he too will go to war.” (Devi, 8). War, according to the royal women, take away the lives of their male children. The attitude to have girl-children in the royal household underlines the gruesomeness, horror and antipathy to war.

Naming Ceremonies

The naming ceremonies of the newborn children differ between the royal clan and the marginalised. The rituals are simple in the houses of the marginalised. The community as a whole is involved in the rituals. Grandparents choose the name. The baby is shaven and bathed in water warmed by the sun. Musicians play and the women sing. The maternal uncle feeds the baby. The villagers are treated to a feast. The naming ceremony in a royal household is an elaborate ritual. There are offerings to *Agni* (fire). The elder male members decide the name, the priests study the signs and the *Acharya* (head priest) draws up the horoscope. The female members of the royal clan are not consulted in the choice of names of their children. The mother in a palace rears her child just for a year. Afterwards, wet mothers take over its upbringing. Royal offsprings are not raised by their mothers. The marginalised women rear their children from birth to adulthood.

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Gender Equality

There prevails gender equality in the *Janavritta* community. The domestic work is shared between the men and the women on an equal basis. In the absence of men, the women take the responsibility of completing the job. The marginalised women say, “When the men go off to war, we women protect our homes” (Devi, 13), Further, they say, “Not just the men, the women also guard the fields.” (Devi, 12). The royal women, on the other hand, live in their quarters in palaces. They do minimum work and they are assisted by women servants.

Heavenly Abode

The royal belief was that the heroes of war were destined to *divyalok* (heaven). The five women question this belief. “Godhumi says,” No chariots came down from *divyalok*. They did not go to heaven. The foot soldiers died fighting in the very same *dharmayuddha*. But no funeral rites were held for the souls.” (Devi, 16). There is a powerful indictment against the war: “Brother kills brother, uncle kills nephew, *shishya* (disciple) kills *guru* teacher.” (Devi, 23). Marginalised women refuse to accept *Kurukshetra* war as *dharmayudda*. They see no holiness or righteousness in it. They see only greed for throne in it. The funeral song of the five *dasis* runs thus: “This war’s turned villages into cremation grounds, hai hai! (Devi, 10). Gandhari representing the royal women also endorses the view of the marginalised. She holds Lord Krishna Vasudeva responsible for the war. She describes the war as “fratricide” and “savage” (Devi, 8).

Wholesome Contrast

To conclude, *Panchakanya* offers a contrasted picture of the lives of the women of the royal clan and the marginalised. Ceremonies predominate in a royal wedding whereas a marriage is a social event in the household of the marginalised. Royal widows live shadowy lives according to the instructions of priests and the head priest of the royal society. Royal weddings are ostentatious and elaborate. Fire ceremony is an important part in royal weddings. The weddings in the families of the marginalised are simple. Married women conduct the bridal ceremonies. Widowhood is a scaring and terrifying experience for the royal women. They live alone in austerity. The marginalised widows live naturally and the elders arrange remarriages for

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them. Remarried marginalised widows continue their procreative function. The royal women live in palaces isolating themselves from nature. The marginalised women live in close proximity with nature. Pregnant women in royal households avoid manual labour. The marginalised women do physical work during their pregnancy. Royal women expect the would-be-born child to be a female. A prince in the royal household grows to become a war hero and he perishes. The royal women disapprove themselves of war. A princess does not participate in a war and so her life is secure. The marginalised women do not attach any importance to the sex of the would-be-born child. They accept any child – male or female. The royal women leave their babies in the care of the wet mothers. The marginalised women rear their babies themselves. The marginalised women harbour gender parity. They support their male counterparts in their daily lives. There is gender inequality in royal households. The royal women depend on their male members on all occasions. Hence, there is male-female equality among the *lokavrittis*. The male-female relationship is marked by inequality in the royal households. The royal women attach holiness to the *Kurukshetra* war. The marginalised women dispel the holiness associated with the war and indict it powerfully. Thus, the *Panchakanya* presents contrasted pictures of the lifestyles of women of the royal clan and the marginalised.

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